

Tiresome teachers who call your parents
to school when you've done nothing wrong;
picky parents who keep comparing you with
the neighbour's child; **foul friends** who treat you
with awe one day and dump you for the
stylish new kid the next.

Does this sound **a bit like your life?**

Scharada Bail guides you
through this labyrinth of familiar problems
through stories, suggestions and sound advice.

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Rs. 100

GROWING UP

SCHARADA BAIL

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Dealing with
**Tiresome Teachers,
Picky Parents and
Foul Friends**

SCHARADA BAIL

SCHOLASTIC

GROWING UP

Scharada Bail is an award-winning author of books for children and adults. She won the First Prize in the Commonwealth Essay Competition in 1973 and second place in the Outlook-Picador Non Fiction competition in 2000. She has also won several prizes for her children's books. Her earlier books include *Icons of Social Change* and *The Hanuman Heart*.

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Growing Up

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TIRESOME TEACHERS,

PICKY PARENTS

AND FOUL FRIENDS

Scharada Bail

SCHOLASTIC

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*To my children Shivani and Shishir Bail,
Living embodiments of inspiration and wisdom.*

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If there's one thing I can count on having been a success at—it's the whole process of being alive! Of course, this is hardly much of an achievement, since billions of other humans are also engaged in doing this with roughly equal success. But learning about life while living it, and observing the struggles that others are going through while doing the same—this is what writers can do with some success.

This book is written out of such observation, particularly of my own two children, who have recently been adolescents, and in some sense, still are. While it is quite different from my earlier books about travel, social activism, and mythology, I hope it will find a place in the hearts and minds of today's teens who are bombarded with every kind of information on every conceivable subject, but who lack a reliable compass to navigate their own troubled emotions.

With much affection to all young seekers,

Scharada Bail

PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS

No. _____

Date _____

WHEN PARENTS DEMAND

WHAT WE ARE NOT

TOO THRILLED ABOUT

PROVIDING

Trouble Arrives in Twos

Breakfast could hardly be called a meal. In Anita's hectic morning, it was usually a few minutes of stuffing something into her mouth, or of grabbing the whole thing off a plate and putting it into a small plastic box, and racing to the end of the road to reach there seconds before the school bus did.

'Why do you always have to eat in the bus?' her mother would ask in a pained sort of way. 'Are you actually eating it? Or is everyone else getting most of it?'

This was usually the cue for her father to start talking about the importance of eating right, of eating on time, and other related topics. Anita never knew the end of this particular lecture because she always ran off somewhere in the middle!

But today, Anita actually had the time to eat the scrambled eggs and toast that her mother put in front of her. She was feeling happy that she had got ready for school in time for once. Papa's head was hidden behind the newspaper, and

Anita began reading the headlines as she munched. 'Headless torso found near railway bridge' looked like the most interesting piece of news on the front page.

Papa lowered the paper and nodded approvingly when he saw Anita actually sitting down to eat. Anita's mother sat down at the table with her plate, and began to eat. 'So last evening you were at the Golf Club?' she asked, and Papa replied, 'Yes, I was with Menon till ten o' clock.'

Anita felt a prickle of alarm right away, and Papa's next words confirmed it.

'He says his elder daughter has got admission into Cambridge University,' said Papa. 'Imagine! Cambridge on a fully paid fellowship! And the younger one is showing signs of following in her footsteps.' Here Papa gave a meaningful look to Anita, who was the same age—thirteen—as Mr. Menon's younger daughter, Devi.

Now both her mother and father turned to look at Anita and her mother began, 'At least take a little more interest in the world, Anita. If you watched less TV, you could read more newspapers and magazines ...'

'I already know that a headless torso was found near the Railway bridge,' offered Anita. For a few seconds, her father and mother looked at one another, puzzled. Then Papa turned the paper around and glanced at the bottom of the front page.

'Very clever, Anita,' he said, dryly. 'But none of these

smart replies can get you into Cambridge.'

'Okay, Papa!' called Anita, already launched on her dash to the school bus. 'I'll go to Harvard instead!' She sprinted, feeling pleased with her exit line.

Later in school, however, it seemed as if she should have thought of a much humbler and safer exit line. Her Maths teacher was so distressed by Anita's marks in the last test that she wrote a note in Anita's diary asking her mother or father to come and meet her the next day. Mrs. Thomas, who taught Geography, and was easily the strictest and most sarcastic teacher they had, found Anita grinning as she was bending to pick up something from the floor, and became convinced that her student was laughing at her. She became even angrier at Anita's wide-eyed 'Who, me, Miss? I wasn't doing anything!' and said, 'All right Anita, if you are as innocent as you look, you will have no objection to explaining everything in front of your parents. I want one of them to come and see me tomorrow.'

'But what was I doing, Miss?' howled Anita in genuine anguish.

'Creating a disturbance in class', said Mrs. Thomas grandly, and swept off to her next class a few rooms down the corridor.

Her friend Pia comforted Anita in the lunch hour. 'You haven't really done anything, so why worry?' she asked Anita.

'What do you mean? Two teachers have asked to see

them. How will my parents believe I haven't done anything?' asked Anita bitterly. 'Besides, the Maths marks are the lowest I've got all year.' She sounded sober and sad now, nothing like the sassy kid who had run for her school bus in the morning.

Pia paused with a spoon of dal poised half-way to her mouth. 'I wonder what it is with parents,' she said. 'They always keep telling us to speak the truth. But they rarely have the time to listen when we do.'

'Yes, really,' agreed Anita. 'What do I tell them about tomorrow's meeting? My father's going to be really upset with my marks.'

'Haven't you told him yet that you want to be a veterinary doctor? If he knew that maybe he wouldn't be so obsessed with your Maths,' said Pia.

'You still need Maths till the end of school, silly,' said Anita. 'Besides I find it hard to talk to him about what I want to do. Most of the time, it is *him* telling me what someone *else* is doing. Some kid who's a total prodigy!' she said bitterly, thinking of the deadly Menon daughter duo.

'I know,' said Pia. 'They're horrible when they go on the comparison trip. But you should talk to your parents about your own dreams more. I've told mine clearly that I want to be a hairdresser for the film industry.'

Anita always admired Pia's nerve at articulating this particular ambition.

'What is this, Anita? Of course it's okay for you to be whatever you want,' said her mother.

Anita looked into her mother's eyes. All she saw there was love and understanding and warmth. She felt a great burden lift from her mind. But she also knew the moment had come—the moment to speak of tomorrow and the teacher's meetings ...

So what do you think Anita said?

MEMORIES AND MASALA DOSAI

Those dreaded words!

Children moving towards the exams that mark the end of school, are probably sick of hearing these words: 'These are the most important exams of your life ... after all they are going to decide your future!' Parents and teachers are constantly making this declaration, and it isn't surprising if it sometimes makes the child want to make a career out of counting pigeons at a neighbourhood park.

Quite often, the pre-exam months with regular parent sermons can become very stressful. Sometimes it makes one wish that some mysterious throat ailment would strike, which would make all parents lose their voices for those two months. With those nagging words and voices out of their heads, perhaps children would sail through their exams without stress.

And then again, perhaps they would not. After all, when our parents are there to remind us to do virtually everything,

we do get rather used to their reminders, don't we?

So why don't children pay a little more attention to the subject of their parents' lectures? And parents lecture their children a little less? If both sides listened a bit more, and felt less 'fed up' of each other, things could be a lot happier!

This is where the masala dosai comes in

I was put in mind of all these things and more, when I stopped for a quick bite at a new South Indian restaurant in my neighbourhood. As I passed a table where a well-dressed woman was sitting opposite a teenaged boy with long curly hair, I saw her lean forward and heard her say, 'These are the most important exams of your life ... after all they are going to decide your future!'

I almost stopped in my tracks and turned around to warn the lady that she was doing one of the Classic Parent Things That Irritate Children. But I didn't. How could I? Instead, I walked on and sat at my table and took a discreet look at the curly haired boy. He had slumped lower in his seat, and his face wore the expression of someone who wouldn't be there if his meal wasn't being paid for. I felt a wave of sympathy for him.

After all, as a student, a rebel, and also a mother and

parent, I've gone through what he was facing, from both sides of the table! The years in between my school days and now have made me see the troubles of that time in a clearer light. Now I can talk calmly about things that used to make me angry, or sulky, or plain depressed.

Dealing with picky parents

Why is it so difficult to deal with parents? Why do children feel like they are banging their heads against a wall when it comes to talking to parents or adults in general? Is it really their fault, as they are constantly told? Or is it the famous generation gap?

Life with parents becomes difficult when we are unable to meet their demands.

Often, it's difficult to meet parents' demands because parents ask us to do things that

- are not to our taste
- are not suited to our abilities
- they did or wanted to do
- someone else is doing, or has done extremely well.

No one likes to be compared to the neighbour's kid, or to be constantly reminded of the great stuff our parents did when they were our age. Maybe your parents give you this, or

similar treatment, and it makes you less inclined than ever to do what they expect.

What do you do when your parents get into the 'when I was your age ...' mode, or worse still, the 'why can't you be like xyz ...' mode?

Slam the door and walk out? Yell at them and tell them what you think of their nagging? Sulk for three days?

All this might make you feel better for the moment, but it's not going to convince your parents that your opinion is worth listening to! So how do you explain to your parents that there are other things you would rather do?

Next time your parents try to push you to do something you are not interested in doing, try not to lose your cool. You have a much better chance to convince your parents why you want something different from what they want for you when:

You work hard and really **shine at something you like**, so it is clear to everybody that you are good at this, and can take it up more seriously.

You give serious thought to what makes you happy, what you feel confident about doing—then you can speak with **real conviction**, not just defiance.

You have **good reasons of your own** to do something you want or don't want to do, and these reasons have not been given to you by other friends, or what you have seen on TV, or somewhere else.

You get the **support of other adults**—your teachers, for

instance—because you have shared your feelings with them and **proved that you can handle responsibility**, and work to succeed at something.

Parents just don't have the time to talk about things that matter to us, or when they have the time, we don't want to talk.

Life seems to be such a mad rush for many parents. Its one long tiring schedule, and the time when they finally flop into a chair and stare at a TV screen late in the evening, is hardly the best time to talk. Or, sometimes, when you have come back after a long game of basketball, or after a fight with a friend, and you want to be alone, your mother or father will be most eager to talk, asking you all kinds of questions.

And at other times, when you feel doubtful, uncertain, anxious, or plain lonely, and want to talk to your parents, they just aren't around, to give you the answers you need.

So what is the solution? How do you get your parents to discuss the issues that are important to you? Here are some fairly simple suggestions:

Every time something comes up that you want to talk to your parents about, **file it away** in your mind. Then, when they are more relaxed, make a point of bringing it up.

Use the **daily shared time**, like during dinner, or just after, to approach them. If they are preoccupied even at such times with phone calls or something else, patiently wait

for them to be free, and then ask for their attention. Asking for attention is a much better way of gaining the respect and involvement of parents than indulging in destructive 'attention-grabbing' behaviour!

Listen with attention when your parents are trying to talk to you. Then they will give you the same quality of listening when you talk.

Show **care and consideration** for your parents in small ways, ways that reveal that their exhaustion and lack of time has not escaped your attention. How can parents respond with indifference when their child is being so considerate?

Parents don't seem to be living the life they keep urging us to lead, or obeying the rules they have set for us.

Constantly being told that something is bad for us, then finding that our parents don't seem to practise what they preach, is always irritating. Why does Dad smoke if cigarettes are so bad? Why do both parents get hooked to the TV till late at night rather than read the books they piously urge us to read? Why doesn't either parent exercise or play a sport when they pull us out of bed to 'be more active'?

It seems really unfair that parents tell us to do this or not do that, and then turn around and practise just the opposite. Dealing with this requires us to be more objective, that is, a little detached and distanced from the situation, to

think clearly. It might help you to:

Observe the effects of the bad habits that parents warn you against, on their own health. Do you really have to look far to see what cigarettes, alcohol, or too much fast food do to people's health and well-being? Take your parents' word for it, and remind them too, once in a while, that you are willing to follow the rules that they are not following too well themselves.

Don't erupt in anger when you feel your parents are being unfair. Think carefully. Can you honestly ask for more power in your equation with your parents if you continue to behave like a child? **Responsible behaviour** will get you more respect. If, after behaving very responsibly, you are still being unfairly treated, point this out to your parents, without losing your temper!

Find a good role model. There are many adults around, some of whom may be living a life much closer to your own ideas of what you want to be like. Observe and pick up notes from these people—nobody has said that your only role models have to be your parents. However, don't bring this too much to the notice of your parents—do you like being compared? After a while, they may notice the people who are gaining your respect, and start questioning their own behaviour.

Dealing with our parents' expectations of us, especially when they clash with our own wishes for ourselves, can be frustrating at times. But if we take the trouble to talk to our

parents about it, it can also be rewarding. Make the most of the time you spend with your parents. After all they are the ones who are most concerned about your well-being and happiness.

How to make friends and influence parents

A little bit of pampering

A cup of tea, a glass of water, a small snack served in a plate—your tired mother will appreciate one or all of these! Learn to make tea, or fix a small snack by yourself.

Mars calling Earth ...

Call home whenever you are going to be late, or whenever you have been out for a while, to let your parents know where you are, and that you are safe. Consistent responsibility brings respect.

A spoonful of sugar ...

'Why do you stop me from doing this when you still do it?' 'I'm old enough to be trusted!' When you are saying such things, make sure you also give your Mom or Dad a hug! As Mary Poppins sang a long time ago, 'A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down ...'

If you've got it, flaunt it

Make something real with the talent or skill you want to develop—write a poem, paint a picture, design a robot, record your drumming—only such concrete proof will help to show your parents the direction you are meant to take.

Cleaning up, calming down

Pay attention to the environment you share with your parents, and take responsibility. Make your bed, clean your room, and not just when you want a favour! Such things have their own value. For instance, cleaning out a dirty shelf is a wonderful way to get over a bout of rage!

Wind up your inner clock

Show that you don't need to be loaded with dos and don'ts, by developing your own sense of when it is enough TV watching, time to switch off the computer, time to come in after an evening playing with friends and so on. 'My inner clock is working fine!' your actions must say.

Good luck!

THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA

No. _____

Date _____

WHEN TV, MOVIES

AND MUSIC VIDEOS

COLOUR EVERYONE

THE SAME COLOUR

The Games Children Play

It was when Neel brought his iPod to school that Tina's attitude really made a marked contrast to the rest of us. We crowded around Neel, exclaiming over his new black iPod Nano—a shiny new portable music player that could hold as many songs as a decent- sized computer could.

'I love this display screen,' said Neel. 'Great to play games!'

'Wow!' said Jay. 'Let me hold it,' begged Behzad. He held out a palm. The iPod was a small gleaming object that could fit snugly in a fourteen year old's hand.

But Neel was reluctant.

All of us sighed, wondering when we would have our own iPods. I had in fact, already asked my parents for one and they had said, 'There are many things we need to buy that are much more important, Sonia. Don't set your heart on an iPod. Think about your coming exams instead.'

Now, looking at Neel's iPod, I desperately wanted one too. Next to me Samantha was saying loudly, 'I'm getting an

iPod next week. In fact, my father offered me an iPod Shuffle, but I said that was too basic. I'll probably get something like this,' she pointed at Neel. 'Or one even better,' she added.

I looked up and Jay and I grinned at each other. Trust Samantha to want to be better, bigger and brighter than everyone else! Everyone continued to discuss the iPod, and at last, Behzad was actually holding it and listening to Neel describe all its features.

In the midst of this scene, Tina finally arrived from where she had been reading something at her desk. She poked her head in through the crowd around Neel.

'Oh, new Walkman,' she said.

We turned incredulous faces towards her. Only Tina could have come up with that one.

'It is not a Walkman, Tina,' I began to explain to my friend in a voice that must have throbbed with the emotion I felt. 'It is a handheld portable music system with enough capacity to be a computer, and you can play games on it, or even store videos.'

But Tina, as usual, was completely indifferent. 'Isn't it one of those things you can listen to while walking or driving? That's what I meant,' she said.

We've been sitting next to each other for four straight years in school, but I swear I just don't know what to make of Tina. She is sometimes so different from the rest of us that it's difficult to handle.

It's not that she deliberately behaves differently, or anything. I think it's because her parents have brought her up very differently from the rest of us. For instance, Tina's house doesn't have a TV! Imagine! We couldn't believe it when we first heard, and thought they'd soon buy one. But they didn't. It's now four years since Tina arrived to study in our school from a small village in the Himalayas where both her parents were working on a rural technology project, and they still don't have a TV. And the funny thing is that Tina doesn't seem to mind!

'Hey Tina, how can you bear missing all the latest music videos, or 'Clueless' or 'Friends' or any of those other cool programs?' I once asked her outright.

She shrugged and said, 'My father says that when I'm grown-up I should have better memories of my childhood than watching lots of TV.'

'And you believe that? Besides, we all have childhood memories—of games and stuff like that,' I was getting irritated at how defensive I sounded, even to myself. 'We're not kids any more Tina,' I said. 'Its TV and films and music and songs that tell us what's cool and what's happening ...'

'And what to buy, or die because one can't have it, and how to idiotically wear clothes that don't suit one, or think that actors and singers are more important than ordinary people ...'

We both glared at each other. 'Okay,' I said. 'I suppose

you can't help being brought up to live like our grandparents did!'

'And you can't help being brainwashed by TV and movies and all the rest!' she shot back. And with this rude exchange, we both had to get back to normal.

Anyway, it's not as if Tina and her mother and father are completely cave people. They have two cars. Her father drives an old jeep, and her mother drives an old red Maruti 800. I add the word 'old' because that's what they are. On PTA meeting days, her parents' car makes quite a contrast to the long, sleek, new cars most of our parents drive.

Tina is an only child, but her parents seem much older than ours. I mean, I don't really know if they are indeed older, but both of them have let their hair turn completely grey. Auntie looks quite nice with her silver hair in a ponytail. She wears jeans and T-shirts and has a nice smile. She looks like a young person with a strange crop of grey. Uncle has rimless glasses and a grey beard in addition to the hair. They are both scientists who spent many years working in the mountains on irrigation and bee-keeping and stuff like that.

When you visit Tina, you are expected to amuse yourself running and catching, playing with her dog or her cats, or 'making' something—Tina's family is always making things. Her house is full of an odd assortment of objects, made with clay, paper, glass, leather and stone. Tina can make leather glove-puppets, stuffed dolls, and even colourful jewellery

using seeds, shells and pieces of twigs!

So if Tina didn't know what an iPod was, it was hardly surprising. She does use computers and e-mail, and her parents both have cell phones, but like the cars, they're old and outdated models. And this doesn't seem to bother Tina at all. I have known her four years and never seen her yearn for something the way we yearned for Barbie and GI Joe. Tina just floats along with her parents in some TV-less bubble, and quite a few of the kids in our class find this weird.

Still, I've never let this bother me because it is so easy to be Tina's friend. She is very funny and can make me laugh. She is also a very reliable person to check out with about studies, if you should miss a day of school, and not at all fussy about lending notebooks. We rarely ever get into a fight or argument, and in spite of all our differences, we've been close friends for a long time now.

A few days after the incident with the iPod, all of us girls were discussing having our hair straightened.

'I think the new straightened look is just too cool,' said Vini, one of the most elegant and fashion-informed girls in our class. 'Some parlours do it for just two thousand rupees, and my cousin, who's in college in Bombay, says that all the film and TV actresses have had their hair straightened.'

Tina sat at the edge of our little group and suddenly spoke up in an uncharacteristic fashion. 'How can all film

and TV parts have straight hair? I remember Preity Zinta had beautiful curls in her last movie.'

'Yes, but that's only for the movie role,' said Vini with a hint of condescension. 'I meant that they're straightening their hair for personal style—it's a cool thing to do!'

'Oh, we understand what you meant, Vini,' said Samantha, with a glare at Tina. 'I'm definitely having my hair straightened. My mother says its okay even if it costs three thousand rupees—she's going to have it done for me in the October holidays.'

'I'm having mine straightened too, Vini,' said Uma, pulling at two stray wisps of her frizzy mop of hair, that she ties into a ponytail with great difficulty.

Tina turned her whole body around to look straight at me. 'And you, Sonia? Are you having your hair done too?'

I don't know why she did that. It made everyone turn and look at me, and I wasn't sure what to say. 'I ... yes, I'm thinking of getting my hair straightened,' I said. Tina had an amused look on her face that made me want to shake her. Why had she tripped me up like that?

When I asked her in the next period she shrugged and said, 'Oh I just wanted to see how much you want to look like a film star or model!'

Two weeks later, there was quite a stir in class when not one or two, but six girls from our class came to school with their hair straightened. It was a Monday morning, and it

made such an arresting sight, that even the teachers were provoked to comment.

'Its coming to such a stage, that instead of the school canteen, you children will start asking for a beauty parlour on campus,' said our class teacher, sarcastically.

'How will you play anything with that hair? Tie it up with rubber bands at once!' said the games teacher.

The rest of us just admired the smooth, smooth sheen of our classmates' hair, that looked like the hair people have in shampoo commercials. Tina, myself and Zoya were the only three girls who did not have straight hair just yet. I was truly impressed by the hair. Whatever it cost, I should convince my mother to let me do it. Maybe next week ...

Then it was time to go on our day long school picnic to the beach, with a factory visit to a manufacturing unit of computers. We went in the school bus, and the trip was good fun.

By the time we reached the beach, it was afternoon, and we girls sat in the shade of the coconut palms, talking about the possibility of a former beauty queen marrying a leading actor. 'What does it matter?' asked Tina in a loud whisper, and I shushed her with a stern look. She might not be interested, but I certainly was. I turned away from her so she would get to see only my shoulder, and continued to debate the next film in which the actor and his supposed fiancée were going to be seen together.

The teachers called us and asked, 'Aren't you going to wade in the water? What's the point of coming to the beach?' We looked at each other. The girls with straightened hair were very uncertain. How could they go into the sea? Wouldn't the salty water harm their precious hair? Their families had spent so much money on it!

Tina called out an answer 'They can't, miss,' she said. 'They're in uniform!' When our teacher looked puzzled at her reply, since we were all wearing our school clothes, Tina laughed. Then, pointing at her head in explanation, she got up and ran towards where the boys were already frolicking in the water.

I stood uncertainly. I hadn't had my hair straightened just yet. I also loved playing in the sea. But going to the water's edge seemed an act of disloyalty to those girls, and I was reluctant to provoke their disapproval. I looked around and saw that Tina was running and screaming with all the rest of the kids who had unstraightened hair.

A few minutes later, I heard her voice call my name, and looked at her.

Tina waved. 'Come on!' she said. 'This water is perfect—so cool, and look, you can see little crabs run into their holes! Come on, come and play with us!'

Even while she was saying this, the fun that my classmates were having looked too good to resist.

I was torn. At that moment, a lot of things ran through

my mind all at once. Was Tina right? Did our trying to be like models and stars and other cool people stop us from being more like ourselves? Why did life have to be all 'He said, she said, have you seen this, have you got that, this is cute, that's so cool, I'm getting this, she's already got it ...?' After all, it wasn't so long since I had run and jumped around like these kids, and I still enjoyed it, when I wasn't busy trying to be somebody else. I looked at my weird friend who was sweaty, panting, and clearly happy ...

So what do you think I did?

ALL SHOCKING PINK IS BORING

Don't just read about it, do it!

Reading the papers every morning, I usually go straight to a part of the paper that I like—the snippets of unusual stories about animals, or odd tales from around the world.

All of us use the media to be in touch with the world around us, gather information or find things we enjoy. TV, radio, movies, newspapers, the internet, mobile phones ... there are so many ways in which information reaches us.

It's not just information, however. Along with the news and the facts come many direct and indirect messages telling us what to do. Buy this, go there, watch that, use this ... and when these messages contradict or go against what we have seen and experienced, or what we have learnt from our parents, families and environment, then strange situations arise!

All good children live in coloured houses

I was waiting for a flight at an airport lounge. A child, about two and a half years old, sat nearby with his mother, his eyes glued to the TV screen on the wall opposite us. He held a sipper of chocolate milk in his hand, while his mother, alert to announcements about their flight, watched the other passengers in the lounge.

There was a commercial break on TV, showing an ad for house paints. The little boy stared intently at the bright colours in the ad, the happy family and dog that romped in the blue, yellow and orange rooms. Then he turned to his mother, and in the voice of one seeking clear and reliable facts, asked, 'Does God give special coloured houses to good children?'

His mother absent-mindedly answered 'Yes'. Then she said, 'Do you want a pink and blue room?' Her son nodded. He thought some more, then said 'Green.' 'OK', said the mother. 'And you can have orange,' said the child generously.

I was suddenly struck by the implications of this conversation.

To the little child, the bright images of the media, and

the stories about God that his family might have told him, made a strange mixture of reality. At one stroke, he thought coloured houses were better than his own, and that being 'good' might land him one. By lazily agreeing to his childish assumption, his mother was in fact encouraging him to think that those who lived in coloured houses, were 'good' and those who lived in drab and ordinary houses, 'not good'. What a dangerous thought! I was quite alarmed.

This little incident brought home to me how much the media has begun to shape and dominate the way we think in the twenty-first century.

Miss Small Town

Not that I didn't know this in the last century. In 1994, Sushmita Sen was crowned Miss Universe and Aishwarya Rai went on to become Miss World. Suddenly the 'beauty bug' seemed to have bitten everyone and everything around me. From that time on, it became terribly important to look good. In fact, every girl now wanted to be beautiful enough to win a beauty pageant. And this became quite possible, because a million beauty contests began to be held in every neighbourhood. So if you could not become Miss World, you could at least aspire to become Miss Small Town!

As a result, beauty-related professions like modelling, acting in films, and working in the fashion and beauty industry rocketed to the top of the ladder. In advertisements, while other young boys and girls aspired to be doctors, lawyers or architects, there would inevitably be one frilly-frocked little girl whose dream 'profession' was to be 'Miss World'!

Happiness is ... owning a bigger washing machine

Fashion and fads are created by media like movies, music videos, advertising and TV. They make things appear brighter, better, bigger and more beautiful than they actually are. What makes it a matter of greater concern is how children and young adults are being drawn into a net of wants, needs and standards of behaviour that are not necessarily the best for them. In fact, in many cases, the behaviour inspired by the media is actually contrary or hostile to the environment in which children live. The westernised, rich lifestyles portrayed are completely at variance with the real lives of most Indians.

The voices in your head

Here then, are some of the ways in which the media influences our thinking. Perhaps knowing about them will encourage you to think for yourself. We all need to be aware of how the media is shaping our thoughts, opinions and beliefs.

The media creates a demand or desire in us for something we don't really need.

A lot of things that are perfectly functional and useful get elevated to the status of 'must-have' objects only because of so much media focus on them. For instance, cellphones are useful to stay in touch with family and work when you are on the move. But the endless ads for newer and newer models, the ways in which phones are presented to us as the fashion accessories of famous models and filmstars, all add up to making it appear very important for a person to have the latest, most 'state-of-the-art' phone, with video cameras, bluetooth, FM radio, and internet connectivity. Does a child being given a phone by her or his parents while still in school really need so many services? A simple handset and pre-paid connection is enough to help children keep in touch with their parents while at school or tuitions. But the media is constantly luring the young segment with the latest models and service options.

The media often makes it seem as if buying something can solve all our problems.

While everyone who earns money deserves to spend it in the way he or she chooses, the media may actually be interfering with our personal choice when the 'Buy-Use-Consume' route is recommended as an antidote for any unhappiness we may be facing.

Eating at a good restaurant, wearing beautiful clothes

and owning gadgets do make us happy for a while. But such happiness will soon evaporate if we have not made an attempt to solve the real problems that lead to our being sad. Are we able to communicate with the people we love? Do we have work that makes us feel fulfilled? After every disappointment are we still able to feel that life is worth living?

These questions cannot be answered without enough effort being made in the right direction in our day-to-day life. Giving Friendship Day cards or gifts is not going to help you have a better relationship with your friends if you don't communicate with them and make an effort to understand them.

There are no quick-fix solutions to happiness. All the shortcuts being indirectly projected by the media come with this danger: they prevent us from solving our real problems with honest and sustained effort.

Sometimes, the media creates artificial levels of achievement, turning perfectly ordinary people into overnight celebrities.

One day, as I sat waiting at the dentist's, a pile of magazines lay on the small table next to me. A teenaged boy came in with his mother to wait for his turn. He looked at the magazine cover of the film magazine right on top. It had a headline that screamed 'The private life of A.....' 'Who's she? I didn't know she had a public life!' he remarked.

In the strangely lop-sided world of the media, many genuine achievements go unheard or unrecognized, and very ordinary people become 'stars' overnight. Their 'private lives' are up for dissection before they've done much in their 'public life'.

When we uncritically accept the media portrayal of such personalities, we run the risk of showering our attention and admiration on people who later turn out to be quite unworthy. We also try to become like people who may in fact be less gifted in all departments than our family members, friends, or ourselves!

So choose your role models with care, and ask yourself if your admiration for them stems from their real achievements or from what the media chooses to say about them.

The messages of the media often make it seem as if there is only one right way to look, think and feel.

Have you ever looked at the images of actresses, actors and models on TV, and got this eerie feeling that they are clones of each other? All the shampoo ads show straight silky hair, all the people are impossibly thin and all the women are incredibly well-groomed even when they're washing clothes at home! Very subtly, we're being told that to be happy, functional beings we must be thin, we must have silky hair, we must be impeccably dressed (preferably in silks and

chiffons) ... and gradually we begin to hate the way we look because it is not how all 'those people' look.

As if this were not bad enough, the media also encourages us to think in a particular way. So wanting to be the neighbour's envy is portrayed as a legitimate feeling, and wanting to be laidback, driving an old car, or not bothering too much about one's clothes is seen as the behaviour of a 'loser'. The media creates a world where men are strong and masculine and women are pretty and feminine, and there is no space for either of them to be just plain human beings, who are a little bit of both.

When we're being bombarded day and night with these messages, images and attitudes, we have to be very aware and very strong to be able to keep our individuality. Otherwise, we'll all end up being exactly like each other, and that would be so boring.

What the media creates is a bubble-gum world, where real concerns are obscured, and trivial ones are projected.

There is so much intelligence, money and energy among the people of the world that there is no reason why we should not be able to solve all our problems. One of the reasons why this does not happen is because it is the media that provides the images, stories, issues and solutions that we read, see, hear and accept. An ad for a soft drink has Sachin Tendulkar

playing cricket with rural boys. How many of us have seen it and wondered about the facilities that village children have for playing sport of any kind?

Very few would have had the time or inclination to follow the ad on TV with such thoughts.

You may argue that the job of the ad-maker is to sell the soft drink, and not to evoke these thoughts. But the point is, the media can manipulate us and make us see only what we are meant to see. It is up to you and me to see beyond the media, to the reality and sometimes the sadness or ugliness that lies behind the pretty pictures that are shown to us.

The influence of the media makes people obsessed with their own enjoyment, instead of being concerned about the common good.

The media encourages us to buy more, spend more, be more beautiful, be more ambitious ... it glorifies competition, and pits people against each other. It's all about the individual, and about being better than the others around us. It is never about the collective good or the interests of the society at large.

Just think, if all of us were concerned only with ourselves, it would be impossible to live in any kind of happiness or harmony. Making space for each other, for our different ideas and hopes, and helping others less able than ourselves, is a necessary quality for a society.

So we need to be careful about where the images and messages of the media are taking us. We have to stop sometimes, and use our inner compass, so that we don't wander mindlessly in the direction that we are shepherded by those who run the media.

How not to be a mindless sheep

This is how you can deal with the media in your own life:

Engage. Enquire. Experience

Engage with events, personalities and situations around you. Don't depend on a media view of everything. Whether it is a tsunami, an earthquake or a flood, things that happen on TV happen in your city, town or neighbourhood first. So engage with them there.

Enquire about the reasons why things are happening the way they are, or about what can be done to solve common problems. Don't accept only what you see and read in the media, but follow the facts for yourself. Newspapers often have their own biases, and as an intelligent reader, you have to learn to look behind the bias and find the truth.

Experience life for yourself. Learn about things from doing them. At the end of your childhood, have more hours chalked up doing fun, serious and creative activities than

hours spent watching ~~TV~~. Take a walk, go for a swim, play some games ... if, instead of playing tennis, Sania Mirza had spent her childhood before a TV set, she would not now be on yours!

Some useful questions in evaluating the media for yourself

Do I really **need** this product/programme/service/
information?

Does this really **suit** my physique/personality/interest/
ability/talent?

Are these people really **worthy** of admiration?

Is there something **more** to this (story/news report/event/
issue) that no one is telling me?

Hope you found this chapter helpful in not falling into
the 'brash brat' trap of the media!

All the best!

TIME MANAGEMENT

No. _____

Date _____

WHY TIME TRULY FLIES
AND HOW TO CATCH IT

Running out of Cheats

He didn't have any tuition on Wednesdays, so it was Anish's favourite day of the week. He spent the whole hour in the school bus discussing the computer game he was going to play as soon as he reached home.

'The latest cheats for 'Night Patrol' are available on a website my cousin showed me,' said Sunny. 'I reached Level 6 because of them.'

'What? Tell me, quickly, what do we do when the gang comes out of the deserted building on the highway in Level 4?' asked Anish.

'X320', said Sunny smugly. 'And for the attack in the swimming pool, it's Control T, followed by Control B12 when the grenade lands in the water.'

Anish was busy scribbling these in his rough note-book as Sunny talked. His school bag hung open as he wrote in the moving bus, and some of the books were precariously poised, as if they would fall out soon. But Anish was hardly aware of

this as he finished writing the cheats. He just had time to stuff his notebook back in his bag and pull half heartedly at the zip before he got off the bus at the street where he lived.

It was only half past four. Anish could hear his dog Dino barking a welcome from the balcony of the flat on the second floor that was his home. By the time he reached upstairs, Dino was ecstatically happy, jumping up and licking him all over. He clearly wanted to be taken for a walk by his beloved master, but Anish was not in the mood. Mary, the cook who lived along with his family, had opened the door for Anish. She had made hot parathas and aloo sabji for him to eat, and a big glass of milk that he gulped down while watching Cartoon Network. 'Let her take Dino out,' thought Anish.

'Anish, please remember to start your homework at five o'clock,' said Mary. 'Your mother just called up and asked about you.'

As if on cue, the phone rang and it was Anish's mother from office, enquiring about his school day.

'Hi Ma,' said Anish with his eyes glued to the TV screen. 'No tuition today. And I have homework only in Maths and History. I'll do it right away.'

'Okay Anish,' said his mother, sounding relieved. 'I'm glad you've decided to do your work early. Don't have another late night. I am going to be delayed today. Please eat when Papa comes.'

'Right Ma,' said Anish. 'Oh cool,' he was thinking. His

father never came back from work before nine o'clock. His office was quite far away. 'That means that I am free to try those new cheats till nine o'clock!' he thought.

He put on the computer directly he had finished his snack, to see what he could do with Level 5 of 'Night Patrol'. For a few moments, while the computer took time to boot, it occurred to him that he could start his homework, and finish both Maths and History, then settle down to play till his father came. But even as he thought this, the phone rang, and it was his friend Sham, who had been on the schoolbus with him and had missed some of Sunny's 'cheats' wisdom.

'I'm in the cinema theatre lobby and the man I'm after is holding a hostage near the popcorn machine!' Sham said excitedly to Anish.

'Oh, right,' said Anish. 'Just turn and duck behind the counter.'

'I'm nowhere near the counter, and he's threatening to shoot.'

'Okay, its time for a cheat that will take you behind him on the fourth step of the entrance to the inside. From there you must pounce on him from the back,' said Anish.

'So what's the cheat?' asked Sham breathlessly.

'M55\$%' said Anish. He stayed talking a few more minutes. By the time he had finished, his homework had flown completely out of his head. The bright screen of the computer beckoned him ...

When he heard his father park the car with the characteristic reversing tune downstairs, Anish hurriedly got off the computer and arranged his books on the study table. He had just opened the books to start the first sum of the Maths homework exercise when his father popped his head into Anish's room. 'Don't be so hard at work, Anish!' he called. 'Come and eat dinner with me.'

Anish turned and grinned at his father. 'Coming, Papa,' he said. He was most relieved. Thank goodness his father had thought he had been seriously studying.

But during dinner it became clear that his father hadn't really been deceived.

'Please finish your homework before you start playing games, Anish,' said his father, looking straight into his eyes. Anish paused with his food half way to his mouth. 'Blast Mary!' he was thinking. 'Who else could have told my father?'

His father continued, 'You know Anish, I'm really disappointed by the way you lose all track of time when you sit at the computer, whether it is to play games, or chat online with your friends. You know that's the main reason we have arranged for you to have tuition in three subjects, and almost every day of the week. If you continue being so unconscious of time....' He grimaced, and went on, 'We'll have to fill up this last remaining day, as well.'

'Papa!' Anish was moved to exclaim. 'No tuition on Wednesdays, please!'

'Okay, Anish,' agreed his father, his face softening. 'But look at how you use your time! After you come back from tuitions, when you're supposed to do your school work, you either stay awake watching TV, or playing computer games. Eleven or eleven thirty is no time for a boy to go to sleep at night when his school bus arrives outside by seven forty-five in the morning. No wonder you're falling asleep in class. Just get into the habit of doing your school work as soon as you're home. Sleep at a reasonable hour—latest by ten o'clock. Then we'll consider dropping the science tuition. After all, your marks have to improve first.'

Anish nodded, looking sulky and upset. Just now he was wishing for a cheat that would take him far away from the dinner table, maybe to the top of the Empire State Building! 'GoESB#*' he muttered to himself.

'What did you say?' asked his father, with one eyebrow raised in enquiry.

'Nothing,' said Anish, looking down at his food.

'Some more cheats, huh?' asked his father, shrewdly. He looked grim. 'One day you will run out of cheats, Anish.'

As the days flew by, it hardly seemed like Anish had even heard or paid any attention to what his father had said at the dinner table. He could barely open his eyes most mornings because he had been awake too late the previous night. His mother would coax him to finish his glass of milk, or eat a bit of breakfast, before he went to catch the school bus. He felt

sleepy during the day and didn't pay much attention in class. The only time he came alive was when he discussed gaming with his friends, or when he chatted online till late at night, long after tuitions and dinner ...

'How can you still be awake Anish?' his mother would ask, standing poised to switch off his bedroom light. Anish would still be on the computer.

'Just five more minutes, Ma', Anish would say. 'I just have to complete this level before sleeping.'

'Papa is right, Anish,' his mother would say, with more than a hint of sadness in her voice. 'If you don't learn to schedule the time you spend on the computer, we will have to take it away from you. And I would hate to do that.'

'Oh Ma, you can't,' said Anish. He turned and saw there were tears in his mother's eyes. 'You won't,' he said, relieved. The fact that she was sad and disappointed with him bothered him not at all. Her tears told him she was too soft to be really strict. That's all he cared about. He continued playing, and she shook her head and left the room saying, 'Just five minutes then ...'

Anish's marks in the half-yearly exams were so horrible that he couldn't believe his own eyes or ears. He looked down at his report card. 'How could I get these marks after all the tuitions I go to? And what does the teacher mean by her remark—Anish is an intelligent boy who needs to apply himself a lot more if he is to improve—what does that mean,

is she praising me or blaming me?' For one wild second, he considered a low, real-life cheat. What if he signed like his dad or mom, and never showed this card to his parents?

But the next second, the thought had died. He remembered the humiliation and punishment meted out to a boy in the ninth standard the previous term, who had forged his parents' signature. He had been hauled up before the entire assembly, and had apologized in public. No way did Anish want such public exposure.

However, even as he walked out of the school bus, he was thinking of the way his father signed his initials. 'I could do it with a little practice,' he thought, feeling ashamed even as he thought it. He walked towards the school bus with slow and reluctant steps. While the others made their usual noisy way home in the bus, Anish was thoughtful. 'Is it true what Ma and Papa say? Is it because I don't have any sense of time passing that things are as bad for me as they are?'

The phone was ringing he walked inside. It was Sham, wanting some more guidance about 'Red Alert', a new game they had both begun to play. Instead of launching immediately into a description of the cheats Sham would need, Anish asked him, 'Sham, how do you manage to get okay marks in all your tests?'

'My grandmother never lets me play till I have finished my work,' said Sham. 'Besides, I can't play games till late in the night. I have to be in bed by ten, because I share the

room with my younger brother. And my parents have a rule about waking up early, to do any remaining homework, and to pack my bag properly for school.'

'Oh,' said Anish. He was remembering the times he had had to return from school with angry red remarks in his calendar, because he had forgotten to take some book or the other. His parents were always reminding him to pack his bag properly. But was he listening, and where was the time?

Dino's welcoming leaps brought Anish out of the thoughtful mood he had fallen into. He decided to take his dog for a walk. 'What a loving dog Dino is!' Anish thought. 'Always there to show affection for me. If I wake up a little earlier, or play a little less on the computer, I can take him for a walk every day.' Anish walked out on the street with Dino, becoming more conscious every minute of the way his games and other leisure pastimes gobbled up his time, leaving him few hours or minutes for others. It now seemed very selfish indeed.

When he and Dino reached home, Mary was beaming. 'Your mother is on her way home. She asked you to be ready. She is taking you out to eat pizza.'

On any other day, Anish would have jumped up in the air with delight at the thought of this treat. Today, he felt wooden and sad. How he wished things could be different! He would have to do the cheating on his report card after his mother had given him a treat! How could he do such a thing to his

sweet and gentle mother? Whatever else he knew or did not know, Anish certainly had begun to understand that things took a lot more time and effort to make all right in real life, than they did in computer games, with cheats. And what if his bad step came to light?

‘But I can’t show that report card to Papa!’ he thought with desperation.

He got ready to go to the pizza restaurant with his mother, slowly, carefully, thoughtfully. He was almost thirteen, a well-built boy in Class Eight. He had often nagged his parents to buy him this and that. But now he knew his parents had already given him all that he needed. All that they had asked in return was for him to manage his time better, to complete all his work, and show good results in school. And that was just what he hadn’t done. It was funny he hadn’t even bothered with a time-table for himself before. His tuition hours had been fixed by his parents, and he spent all his hours ‘escaping’ the schedules that had been laid down for him. If he had been more regular about his work, perhaps he would have less tuitions to struggle with. After all, this is what his parents had been telling him all along.

His mother honked from downstairs. Anish went down, and they drove off to eat their pizza. She chattered happily all through the meal, enjoying the outing with her son, while Anish was quieter than usual. When they reached home, she sat down to watch TV, before Anish’s father returned.

Alone in his room, Anish began to practise writing his father’s initials on a small pad. At first, his hands trembled a little, and the writing came out all wobbly. Then, after a few minutes, his hand steadied. But when he took the report card out of his bag, his heart started thudding very loudly indeed. He could hear the sound of the TV from the hall, and took courage from this fact. ‘At least Ma is occupied and won’t know,’ he thought.

Screwing up his courage by tightly closing his eyes once, Anish pulled his report card towards himself. He picked up a fountain pen ...

‘What’s going on, Anish?’ he heard the horrified voice of his mother at his elbow and jumped in terror.

His mother picked up the report card from the table and looked at Anish. She took a quick look at the pad lying on the table, on which he had been scribbling a few minutes ago. ‘Well, Anish? What’s happening?’ she asked again.

Anish tried to speak, but found his throat blocked, and coughed to clear it. The time had come for a dozen explanations ...

So how do you think Anish explained himself?

SAVED BY THE BELL

Grown-ups who go tick-tock

If I were to write down a single sound of my childhood that I truly began to hate, and wish I never had to hear, it would have to be the sound of my alarm clock. It was the sound that told me I had to wake up and go to school. Even so many years after I've left school the sound still follows me around. Some mornings when I am in the kitchen, I hear the faint ring of the same alarm go off in some neighbour's house. I smile as I think of some child sleepily putting off the alarm and going back to sleep, to be pulled out later by irate parents.

The alarm was only one of the ways in which time ruled my life in my school and college days. Another way was through the constant reminders by my elders (and presumably betters) to do things. 'Put off the light, it's two o'clock in the morning!' from my brother who shared my room. Or from my mother, 'We're having guests for dinner. Make sure you've bought the vegetables by noon,' or, 'Grandfather needs to have his eye-drops put in at eight o'clock, and we are going

out.' It seemed as if grown-ups were nothing but variations of watches or clocks, keeping the time.

Tiresome teachers who slow time down

In the days when I was in school, I noticed the tricks that time can play. Seconds and minutes seemed to stretch unbearably in the Maths period, and became inexplicably shorter when I was playing with friends! Trying to stifle a yawn in class, I would long for the bell. While the teacher's voice droned on, I would count the minutes slowly, wondering when I was going to be saved by the bell ...

This wasn't the only way time tricked me, of course. It also seemed to telescope itself, and become much shorter, assuming alarmingly small dimensions just before exams. When I sat with open textbooks, trying to study, I would remember in despair the long hours spent in class. How I wished I could have some of that time back! The hours before examinations seemed to fly.

Of dreams and nightmares

On a recent train journey, all these and many more time-

related topics came to my mind once again. My berth in the train was right opposite a family that occupied all the three berths on the other side. Their ten-year-old daughter had climbed up to the top berth right at the beginning of our journey and was cuddled up there with a Walkman plugged into her ears, occasionally swinging to the music we could not hear.

At one point, when there was a silence below, she leaned down and said, in the typically loud voice of one who is made temporarily deaf by music in the ears, 'Ma, I dreamt that I got up at ten o'clock on exam day!'

This momentous announcement made us all smile. But it reminded me how much worry my own exams used to cause me. Such dreams—or nightmares—had haunted me too at one time. Nightmares are natural signs that our brains are getting worried about something, and in school, it is often exams that produce the greatest fear.

So much to do and so little time

Children today are caught in a terrific bind as far as time is concerned. Managing time in a sensible way has become a dire necessity for kids just so that they can get the best out of school, friends and leisure activities.

Why is time such an issue for children today? Why are they always so rushed?

Too many activities after school.

There are so many areas that have opened up for young talent in recent times, that parents are often obsessed with finding the right activity for their child to excel in. Playing sports like football or squash or skating, learning musical instruments like the violin or the keyboard, drawing and painting, theatre and creative writing, modern or traditional dance, karate or judo—there's no dearth of activities for parents to push their kids into.

Faced with such a variety, enthusiastic parents sign their children up for all kinds of things. In addition to all these, there is the usual load of school work, with its demanding schedule of tests, exams, and often, tuitions after school hours.

If you are caught in one of these situations, it is probably time to cut out a few activities from your life. Sit down and evaluate the activities: which are the ones which are really precious to you, what are the areas where you seem to be showing some aptitude or natural talent and which are the classes that can be safely dropped without too much heartache? Think clearly, and give yourself a fair chance; some things which may be difficult to master initially could end up giving you a lot of pleasure some years down the line. After you have listened long enough to your own 'inner voice', have a talk with your parents. No parents would want to burden their child if such activities are interfering with

academic performance, or with their child's peace of mind!

Late nights, little sleep

When you relax with some pleasurable activity like reading a book, seeing a movie on TV, playing a computer game or chatting with your friends online after completing your homework, classes and tuitions for the day, you often end up being awake long after the time you should be in bed. It is not wrong to relax in this way, the risk is that you end up losing track of time once you are absorbed in what you do. So you think it is only nine o'clock, but before you realise it, nine becomes eleven, and you have had a late night again. Repeatedly going to sleep at a late hour makes you sleepy and tired the next day at school.

Thus begins a pattern of late nights and dull days. Sleep is as precious as food, particularly at a young age. Your brains are growing as you sleep then, and sleep deprivation can make you forgetful, and slow to learn. Don't sacrifice sleep for anything. If you are getting less sleep than you need, it is a sure sign that you need to reschedule your activities.

Wrong priorities

The ability to plan what to do first, and what to do next is a necessary quality of effective time managers. We often fail to function efficiently because we have wasted too much time doing things that are not so important, and not enough

time doing things that are vital. Have a good idea of what is most important at any time. Put down a list of priorities instead of tackling the first available thing. This will also help you get organised.

Time management often means that we begin to manage other areas of our life more effectively as well.

Masters of putting off, and graduates in 'last momentitis'

When there is not enough time to do things, or we have been spending too much time in leisure activities, we often end up putting things off and this leads to our becoming victims of 'last momentitis', the most frightening symptoms of which are cramming just before exams, with a sinking feeling in the pit of one's stomach.

Postponing things to another day or to the last moment, means a much lesser likelihood of doing them reasonably well. It also makes us anxious and worried. Both these tendencies should be avoided at all costs. When there are assignments, projects, or other school-work that is to be done over a long time, like a few weeks, the temptation to put them off is strong. Beware! This is the first symptom of that dread disease—last momentitis!

Taking control of time

Balance work and leisure, and plan enough time for both. Working hard doesn't mean sacrificing all play and leisure activities, neither should we be so stuck in a leisure groove that we forget to do something essential.

Get an early start to the day. The morning hours are when we are fresh and our brain is alert. Getting up a little earlier in the morning can work wonders. That is, provided we have had an early night.

Never sacrifice sleep, particularly for leisure activities like a late night movie, or gaming, or TV.

Stop yourself from getting 'carried away' while having fun. Keep track of the time, even when you are on the computer chatting or gaming. Don't forget that you still have to eat, work, and sleep!

Play games and get enough exercise to relax your mind and eyes. Physical activity is as important for the brain, as Maths exercises! Keep yours sharp, with some fun physical exercise.

Trapping time!

Use interesting measurements for time and work. Every time

you finish studying a lesson, drop a **coloured marble** in a glass jar!

Before you sleep, spend **five minutes** evaluating your day, and five minutes planning the next.

Use your **alarm clock** not to wake you up, but to time activities like playing on the computer, talking to friends on the phone, chatting online, or watching TV. When the alarm bell rings, its time to hang up!

Spend a few minutes each day doing things for others, or towards your home or school environment. **Walk your dog** or shop for your mother. Doing this gives you a break from constantly chasing after your own schedule and activities.

Have a good time!

PEER PRESSURE

No. _____

Date _____

WHEN FRIENDS DEFINE

WHAT WE MUST DO

Tara in the Sand Pit

The children playing volleyball could be heard clearly, but there was no one in the sand pit, or nearby, on the swings and jungle gym and see-saw. Tara felt relieved by this quiet. She was sweating and tired from after-school games. This seemed the perfect spot to catch her breath and have a few moments of peace before her mother came to fetch her in half an hour's time.

She sat on the raised redbrick platform enclosing the sand pit, and stretched her legs out in the sand. All her friends had gone home. Bina, her best friend, had just left in her car. As she waved a last wave to Tara, she had suddenly leaned out of the window and asked, 'Will you be okay waiting alone? Shall I call up my mother and say I am waiting with you?'

'No, no!' Tara said. 'It's only half an hour. I'll be fine!' She waved extra hard, and smiled a little more. Bina put her head back inside and the car drove off.

The truth was, Tara was glad to be alone to consider something that had been troubling her ever since her classmate Natasha and her satellite Mini had asked her to do it just half an hour earlier.

'How could they ask me to let down my house, the game, Sebastian Sir, my teammates, everything?' Tara wondered to herself. As of now, she had no answers.

Tara was alone in the sand pit where the primary school children played, and where she herself had spent so many hours of undiluted fun. Tara had studied in the same school since she was in Lower KG, and this year, she was in the ninth standard.

She still remembered falling from the top of the jungle gym, when she was in the second. She had three stitches on her left knee from that fall.

As her thoughts returned to those days, Tara felt terribly nostalgic all of a sudden. 'How free and happy those days were!' she thought to herself. 'Teachers rarely scolded, especially about studies. And being with the others was more fun too. No rival camps, and special groups, no snobs pretending to be better than all the rest of us!'

She picked up some sand and watched it slowly dribble through her fingers. 'You could sit anywhere, talk to anyone you wanted, wear anything. No one really noticed, unless it was party clothes, or your birthday. Nothing was more 'cool' than anything else.'

Tara's thoughts flowed in this fashion, and she realized that they were leading her to Natasha and Mini. The two girls had become the 'opinion leaders' among her friends. They had brought exclusion and competitiveness into the class in recent years 'Its awful the way some kids with the newest gadgets, with bossy and snobbish attitudes act as if they're better than all the rest,' she thought. 'Why do we let them?' Yet, even as she thought this, Tara knew she could not openly challenge these distinctions and divisions among her classmates. If she did, the others would only snigger at her behind her back, she knew. 'She's just jealous, because she isn't as cool' they would say. Natasha and Mini were considered the 'coolest' girls in class, and everyone wanted to be part of their inner circle. Tara knew this was what Natasha was banking on when she asked her to lose the match so her team could win. She had implied that Tara could become part of their 'cool' gang.

The thing was, Tara had also been an 'opinion leader' at one time. She remembered a time in the sixth and seventh when she and Bina had been on a winning streak in all the major races on Sports Day. They were also fairly good at studies, and the teachers were fond of them. In those years, Tara and Bina had been the 'cool' ones. Because the teachers liked them, they could get away with pulling the occasional prank and this made them even more popular with their classmates.

'But today, who cares about what Bina or I have to say? They're always crowding around Natasha with her stories of parties, and her nail art, and the gifts from her Valentine! And the boys constantly suck up to Vicky, who arrives in his BMW, and silly Ashfaq, whose brains must be stuck together with chewing gum!' Even as she thought these unkind thoughts, Tara had begun to feel uncomfortable. 'Is it true that kids are so shallow? That friendship and loyalty mean so little, and people are prepared to do something dishonest and mean just to stay popular? Like Natasha, asking me to lose the finals of the throwball inter-house matches, because she wants her team to come first! And why? Just so that she can look even better in the eyes of her friends. Imagine, to deliberately lose a match! Does she really expect me to agree?'

'Hey Tara!' a cheerful voice interrupted her reverie. 'What are you doing sitting out here all alone! Didn't you finish your throwball match at five o'clock?' The school sports teacher, Mr. Sebastian, had paused beside Tara.

'I'm waiting for my mother to pick me up, Sir,' said Tara. 'She should be coming soon.'

Mr. Sebastian smiled and asked, 'So who won the match? It was the semis, wasn't it?'

'We did, Sir,' said Tara, grinning. 'Blue House is always on top!'

'Right,' said Mr. Sebastian, nodding in agreement. 'But

this year, looks like you will have a tough fight with Green House. They too have some fine talent.'

'Like Natasha, Sir?' asked Tara.

'No, I didn't mean Natasha,' said Mr. Sebastian with some surprise. 'I thought she had been put in just because the House Captain Ayesha likes her.'

'Ayesha does like her, Sir,' admitted Tara. 'So do a lot of kids in my class, it seems.' She sounded glum.

'Fine, fine,' said Mr. Sebastian. 'But what is there in that to make you look so gloomy?'

'Oh nothing, Sir,' Tara mumbled, looking down. Then she blurted out, 'Its just, there are all these gangs and groups, Sir? These days, its become so important how we look, what we wear, and they go behind all these snooty kids who boast about doing stupid things ...' her voice trailed away. She was already regretting telling all this to Mr. Sebastian. But then, he had always been an encouraging supporter of her performance on the sports ground. She could tell him things she wouldn't tell some other teachers.

'Oh don't mind all that,' said Mr. Sebastian with a dismissive wave of his hand. 'You don't have to worry about those gangs. You're a good sportswoman, a good student.'

'But I do have to worry, Sir!' almost wailed poor Tara. Then, lowering her voice, she added, 'Sir, she asked me to lose the finals for Green House.'

'What, but you play for Blue House,' said Mr. Sebastian

automatically. Then, his expression changed. Frowning angrily, he asked, 'Who asked you to do WHAT?!'

'Natasha asked me to play badly, so that her house could win this time,' said Tara unhappily. 'I didn't know what to do. The kids all like her and think she's so great. I didn't know whether I should play really badly or what ... how could she ask me? I've been feeling really bad.'

'Hmm ...' Mr. Sebastian sounded thoughtful. 'Yes, of course you feel bad, but never consider even for a minute that you have to do something dishonest just because someone tells you to.'

He went on, 'Children do change, Tara. Tell me,' he straightened up and looked keenly at Tara. 'What's bothering you more? All this ganging up and the fact that you have less of a following than before, or that you have been asked to do something that is wrong? Another person might say it's not so bad.'

'Oh no, Sir!' said Tara quickly. 'I know it's wrong and I don't know how she could have asked me! How could she think I would do something like that? And it's also their attitude that's bothering me. Look how they behaved when that new girl came last year. Just because she wore ribbons in her hair, they made such fun of her! Because they think ribbons are old-fashioned. It has to be those 'scrunchies' or some fancy clips. It's like we can only do what is seen by them as acceptable, not what we want to do.'

Mr. Sebastian smiled. 'People's ideas of what is good, what is beautiful, what is daring, keep changing as they grow, Tara. Yesterday you and Bina were the most popular in your class. Today the stylish girls are more popular. Tomorrow it could be someone else. The currents of approval, liking and acceptance among friends and equals keep flowing. Nothing stays the same at all times. The important thing is to hold on to your own sense of right and wrong in the midst of all these changes.'

'Yes,' said Tara. Somehow, having Mr. Sebastian explain it like this was removing the sting from it. 'How desperate Natasha is to retain her popularity!' she thought. She suddenly realised how petty Natasha was. She didn't need to do something she felt was wrong, just to be popular with the likes of Natasha and her friend, Mini.

A small, red-cheeked girl from eighth standard came running up to them. 'Tara! Your mother's waiting at the school gate,' she said, panting.

'Thanks,' said Tara, as she got up to go.

'Thanks a lot, Sir,' she called, as she turned to wave at Mr. Sebastian. He was also making his way back to the volleyball court in the school's central quadrangle. He smiled and lifted his hand in a wave. 'Stay happy, Tara!' he called.

'I will, Sir,' said Tara.

As she settled herself in the front seat, her mother asked Tara, 'Sorry I was late, did you have to wait very long?'

'Oh that's all right, Ma,' said Tara. 'I had a very interesting talk with Mr. Sebastian.'

'With your sports teacher? What did you talk about?' asked her mother, with some surprise.

Tara thought for some time. Her conversation with Mr. Sebastian had helped to ease all the turmoil she had felt earlier in the sand pit. 'He said that the trick to winning is to remember who you are and not keep changing yourself to suit somebody else's idea of what is good or bad.'

Her mother laughed. 'That's very profound pep talk! I'm sure it'll do you good!'

So who do you think won the match?

'BECAUSE IT'S COOL, THAT'S WHY!'

Till death do us part

One sure sign that I have really 'grown up' is how independent I am from my best friends. Yes, I still talk every day to some friend or the other. I still get email forwards, messages on my phone, and birthday greetings from people who think of me. Yet, none of this has the same intensity as the complete, I-am-your-best-friend-and-you-are-mine feeling that I shared with certain friends through school and college.

The truth is, friends never matter the same way in later life as they do in childhood, adolescence and youth. As one grows older, it seems as if being by yourself is a more natural state. You have to deal with a lot of worries on your own, and sometimes you'd rather do things by yourself. But shared activities and pastimes make us especially close to our friends when we are young. Time spent together in school, college, or just hanging around the neighbourhood is the basis for some intense friendships. At that time, it is our friends who make life worth living, and we cannot imagine being without them. We really believe that we will be together forever.

Till life do us part

I remember a pair of girls who were in my class from Class Four to the end of school, whom I never saw apart by more than three feet at any time in all those years. In fact, these girls needed each other's company even to go to the loo or to the water cooler! I used to wonder what they did after going home from school. The answer was, they either talked to each other on the phone, or had sleep-overs at each other's place to work on assignments and homework, or convinced their families to go on joint holidays. I recently found out that one of the girls was married, had three grown sons and lived in the US, and the other was widowed, had a daughter and son and lived in Goa. I felt quite a pang on their behalf. How had they grown out of their friendship and their complete dependence on each other? Life does have a way of teaching us a lot.

Look, I'm an earthling too!

Because friendship plays such a pivotal role when we are young, we have a strong need to please friends. This contains

the seeds of that 'peer pressure' that teachers, and parents, and writers spend so much time discussing. A lot of this talk is worried and anxious. It is obvious that adult observers of children frown on peer pressure. They see it as a force being exerted by your friends to make you behave in a particular way.

Of course, even though you may not discuss these things, you do know that there are many things you do because it makes life easier with your friends. Don't you? This pressure that friends exert is hardly ever deliberate. Unlike the direct instructions to act or behave in a particular manner that we get from our parents, peer pressure is the pressure we feel *inside*, to look, act and behave as our friends do.

This is not always a bad thing. Sometimes it just means that we are settling into the environment we live in and learning to behave like the others around us, so that we won't seem like aliens from some other planet. It's when it forces us to go against our own inclinations and instincts that peer pressure becomes unhealthy.

It is because peer pressure is felt *internally*, that you need to be much stronger inside to resist it as well. It is much easier to slam a door or show some other form of rebellion against a parent or teacher, and much harder to show defiance of one's friends. In school and college particularly, we feel we need our friends just as much as the air we breathe. So we do what they expect us to do, and they do

what we expect them to do, and everyone is afraid of not being just like the others.

Moo! (The herd mentality)

How do we become willing subjects of peer pressure? As children and young people, we are particularly susceptible to wanting to look, think and act like people of our age. Marketing and advertising professionals, and manufacturers of all kinds of goods, know this, and use it cleverly to create sweeping 'fads' for all kinds of things. They have discovered that peer pressure works, because young people seem to have an urge to do exactly what everyone else is doing.

A need for approval and acceptance.

Being accepted, seen as 'okay', 'fine' or 'cool' by our friends is very important to us when we are young. This need for approval makes us accept most of the standards set by people of our age (or by the media, for us!) without too much questioning.

A fear of isolation.

There's a certain age, just before adolescence, when most of us are still getting over other childhood fears. Fear of the dark, fear of punishment, and a fear of being alone are natural

fears when we are small and still growing up. This is the time when peer pressure has its most potent effect on our personality. We give in to the standards of a group that we enter, because we do not want to be lonely or isolated from the group.

Not wanting to 'miss out' on anything.

Children often keep themselves awake well past their bedtime because they are afraid that their parents and siblings, or guests and visitors may have too good a time without them! Later, this desire of not wanting to miss anything becomes another push for peer pressure. Your friends seem to be doing all kinds of things—you don't want to be left out.

*I wanna walk like you,
talk like you*

Peer pressure makes itself evident in the way we try to be like everyone else. We don't want to stick out like sore thumbs amongst our peers, so we try to blend into the background by doing exactly what the others are doing.

The clothes we wear

Fads relating to our clothes, shoes, fashion accessories, hairstyles and other factors in our physical appearance are the commonest form of how we try to conform to our peers'

expectations of us. When everyone else is wearing jeans, how can we wear linen pants?

The food we eat

How can we stay stuck with dal, rice and vegetables when everyone else is eating pizza and pasta, or burgers and fried chicken? Fashionable foods are most important when we are young. Fast food may not be healthy, but when our friends are eating fun food, who would want to eat boring and old-fashioned food at home?

The programmes we see

TV programmes are often the easiest way to connect with our peers through shared views on what we have seen—whether it is 'Ninja Turtles', 'Samurai X', or 'Friends'. When we watch these programmes, we are also in the safe zone of being accepted among our peers. We are not weirdos who have no idea what the others are talking about.

'Cool' habits and 'daring' acts

Sometimes peer pressure takes on a more dangerous form, when it is responsible for beginning habits that start out by being 'cool' and go on to become serious threats to our health and well-being. Classic examples of these are smoking, drinking and drugs. While these seem to be 'cool' ways of flouting authority and discipline, or acting adult, grown up

and 'in control', they often end up becoming very serious and harmful addictions. Never believe for a moment that you are being 'daring' by taking up smoking or drinking or drugs. In fact, what you are setting yourself up for is a lifetime of slavery. Your body becomes a slave to powerful chemicals like nicotine, or alcohol, or the opiates in drugs. Such habits don't represent more freedom, they actually take away your individual freedom to decide things for yourself.

Other 'daring' acts, like breaking rules at school, or doing something very dangerous, which involves great physical risks, should also not be undertaken because someone else is doing it, or expects you to do it. Before you do any such thing, just pause and think - why are you doing it? Is it really something you should be doing or want to do? What if it went wrong? Would you survive? What if you don't? What would your mother and father feel then?

Who's afraid of peer pressure?

Finally, why we need to resist peer pressure is not to make ourselves more acceptable to those grey-haired grown-ups discussing the topic on TV or at our school PTA meeting. We need to resist peer pressure when it is making us lesser human beings than we can be, and when it limits us and stunts our growth as individuals.

When it prevents us from developing self-confidence.

Just think. Do you want to be the kind of person who needs to hold your friend's hand to go to the water cooler? How will you manage anything now and in the future if you haven't developed enough self-confidence even for simple tasks? If peer pressure is interfering with your growth as an independent person, resist it.

When it interferes with ideas of right and wrong that we learnt from our parents and elders.

If friends expect you to do something that just doesn't feel right, or makes you uneasy about facing your family, be extra alert. What is really bothering you about what you are thinking of doing? Is there something that goes seriously against your own conception of right and wrong? You need to think deeply about the consequences of such actions, for yourself, and for others.

When it prevents us from acquiring a greater knowledge of the world.

Is too much time spent with friends robbing you of the opportunity to read more, or to travel, explore your city, gather information on many different topics? Being too narrowly focused on our friends can sometimes make us less

aware of the delights of life and living in this world. Think about it. If this is how things are with you, it's time to change.

When it prevents us from appreciating people other than our peers.

When we spend all our time with people our own age, we miss out on seeing things from the point of view of anyone outside this age group. Older people on park benches, responsible people around us hurrying to work, the poorest among us who have no idea of what the difference is between Nike and Reebok shoes - aren't they all part of our world? And shouldn't we spare an occasional thought to what life is like for them? Peer pressure may be screening all this from your view.

Saying 'No, thank you!'

Not just Harry Potter. Read a book that is not the latest rage. Pick up a book on a topic you would like to know more about. This is not to say that you mustn't read Harry Potter because everyone else is reading it. Just go beyond it.

There is a world out there. Look more closely at older people, babies, ordinary workers. Expand your powers of observation of people and the lives they lead, beyond the charmed circle of your friends.

Be different, differently. Express your own daring, ingenuity, and creativity in different ways.

Every one of these steps strengthens you from the *inside*, the place where peer pressure is felt!

Have fun!

COMMUNICATING WITH ADULTS

No. _____

Date _____

GETTING THROUGH TO

GROWN-UPS, WITHOUT

FAINTING IN THE PROCESS

Comfort from the Crowd

'I thought I explained to you very clearly that I would need another five thousand this week to cover the car repairs and the pest control,' the pained voice of his mother could be heard all the way in his bedroom.

'If you would just squander less money on your own activities and friends you wouldn't need to keep asking me for every little bit,' his father sounded sarcastic and biting.

'So all the years I've spent looking after this house of yours doesn't entitle me to even go to the tailor's, or have my friends over for tea?' his mother continued.

But Deep had stopped listening. He was so used to getting up to the sound of his parents quarrelling that he did not recoil in fear and confusion any more. Nor did he pay too much attention to their nit-picking fights. He just turned over in bed and began to stroke the peacefully sleeping form of his cat Benjamin. Benjamin was a large, ginger tom cat. He had been found in the alley, meowing piteously for

someone to lift him and feed him. Deep's mother had said, 'He looked just like he wanted me to pick him up, and I did. I bent to the ground, picked him up and brought him home.'

Deep had been so thrilled by the arrival of his ginger friend that he had named him 'Benjamin' instantly, in honour of the moment when his mother had bent and touched the zameen (ground)! She didn't do that very often.

Deep's father was not the bending type either. He treated his wife's major concerns with scorn. Their combined ill temper left very little space for Deep to talk much about his life and the events and people in it. It was therefore, hardly a surprise that Deep was a quiet and withdrawn child, addressing more remarks and whispers to Benjamin in a day, than he did to either of his parents in a whole week.

Deep gave Benjamin one last kiss on his stomach, before getting out of bed and padding to the bathroom.

He was bathed, dressed, and had eaten his breakfast and left for school before his mother, who was talking on the phone, or his father, who was getting ready for office, had even realized that he had left. His father came out of the bathroom, holding a razor, the shaving foam still white on his cheeks. 'Was that Deep leaving right now?' he called to his wife.

'Yes it was,' she said and resumed her conversation. She had smiled once at her son in farewell as he opened the door to leave.

Deep's father shook his head and went back into the bathroom. 'That child gets more ghost-like every day. Only seen, never heard.'

On his way to school, a short bus ride away, Deep suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to ask his parents for the money for their class excursion. 'Miss had said that we have to get the money by today, or we may miss the trip,' he thought. 'What can I do? I'll just have to ask Miss for another day's time.' His mouth began to droop unhappily at the thought that he had to tackle his teacher.

However, it wasn't Deep who raised the topic, it was Mrs. Nair herself. She called out his name and reminded him about the money. When he said he had not brought it, she looked as if she could not believe her ears. Then, saying nothing, she just continued taking attendance for the rest of the class, and began a new lesson in Geography. But after class was over, she called Deep and asked him to accompany her to the Staff Room.

'What is the matter Deep? You knew that if you didn't bring the money today, you would miss the class excursion. Don't you know that this trip is compulsory? Why didn't you get the money?'

'I ... I just forgot to tell them, Miss,' said Deep, feeling tortured and miserable. 'You mean, about the money?' asked Mrs. Nair. 'No, about the trip,' admitted an unhappy Deep.

Mrs. Nair stared at Deep while the full significance of

this confession sank in. She knew Deep was an only child. Normally, she knew that children loved to talk about their class trip, sometimes endlessly chattering about it for days in advance. She wondered why Deep had not been able to even speak to his parents.

'Are your parents both in town, or are they travelling?' she asked Deep.

'They are both here, Miss,' said Deep.

Mrs. Nair looked at Deep. She hated to put this sensitive child through any more grief. She was beginning to have a shrewd idea of what the trouble was. 'Okay, Deep, go back to class,' she told him. Deep turned and fled. He didn't want to know if he was to be allowed to be in the class excursion or not. He didn't care about anything. All he wanted was to run away from his teacher's scrutiny.

It appeared, though, as if Mrs. Nair had seen a lot more than Deep realized. Before lunch, a boy from the sixth standard brought him a scrawled note from her.

'Dear Deep,

I have spoken to your mother and you are going with us on the class excursion. Don't forget to collect the money from her this evening, and bring it tomorrow.

S. Nair'

Deep felt a mixture of relief and apprehension when he read this. Relief that he was to be part of the trip after all. Apprehension at what he would have to face at home in the

evening after school.

He confided in his friend Hari during lunch break. 'But why didn't you tell your parents?' Hari asked. 'That would have saved you all this fuss.'

'You know how it is at home,' said Deep. 'Sometimes I think I've become invisible. At least before, they would sometimes stop fighting if they thought I was listening to them. Now they don't care. Its just non-stop arguments. I don't know what they're going to say about this excursion money. Probably start another war between them.'

Hari nodded in sympathy.

But it appeared Mrs. Nair's conversation with Deep's mother had not only been about the excursion money. When he went back from school, Deep found his mother had made him a snack.

He washed his hands and sat down to eat without a word.

As he ate, his mother told him about Benjamin's adventure with a sparrow.

'What! He didn't kill the bird?' Deep exclaimed.

'Oh no!' said his mother. 'Our hero decided it was too much trouble to jump up and try to get the bird.'

Deep got up to go and put his plate in the kitchen sink. But his mother did not seem to be in a hurry to leave the table. She spent another few minutes talking to Deep, before getting up and taking an envelope which she tucked into Deep's school bag.

'Here's the money for your school excursion, Deep,' she said. 'Don't forget to give it to your class teacher tomorrow.'

Then she came and put her arms unexpectedly around Deep. He stood awkwardly, just beginning to be taller than her. His mother cupped Deep's face in her hands. She looked into his eyes, and there was the hint of tears in her own. 'Listen, beta,' she said. 'Just because we haven't learnt to make each other happy is no reason why we should make you so unhappy as well, is there? Talk to me, talk to your father, don't become a silent ghost!'

Deep nodded and eased himself out of her embrace. It was all very well for her to say, but what she asked for was much easier said than done. In fact, it had become much harder than usual to talk to them, since the time he had seen his father and Mrs. Roy in their family car one day in a different part of town. They had both been laughing, and looked so happy, Deep was shocked. He hardly ever saw that expression on his father's face any more.

Neither of them had seen Deep. He had been waiting to cross the road with his friend Amir, who lived quite far from school, and whom Deep rarely visited. When he saw his father with Mrs. Roy, something caught in Deep's throat, and he wondered if this was the reason his parents never tried to make up after their many arguments.

But of course, he had never been able to ask his father

anything. And he turned more silent than ever.

The excursion was sheer excitement from the moment they left home to go to the station. His mother did not come to the station and his father accompanied Deep, trying hard to break the silence of their mostly conversation-less journey. A big group of chattering children, with their teachers, stood just outside the entrance to the platforms. Deep joined his friends, and waved his father goodbye immediately. When they were all accounted for, the teachers escorted them to the train. There would be an overnight journey to reach their destination.

In the train, as they sat facing each other, on high berths and low ones, at least eighteen children scrunched up together in a space meant for six adults, the conversation turned to adults, and how difficult they sometimes could be.

'Some grown-ups are like the obstacles in an obstacle race,' said Raja. 'You have to jump over them and keep running, or you fall down!'

'My old neighbour is definitely one of those,' laughed Amir. 'He lies in wait in his balcony. If a ball lands near his door, he pops out and begins talking. Either he lectures us about not playing games that can lead to broken windows, or he begins to talk about his glorious childhood. We really don't know what to do.'

'Yes,' agreed Raja. 'If you run away, you are rude, if you

stay and listen, the game's gone!'

'My music teacher is such a pain,' said Tanya. 'If I miss a single class, she calls up my parents and tells them how I am completely dominated by Western influences. I really want to tell her what I think of her sometimes. But what's the use? Even if I shout, she'll put on a long-suffering expression, shake her head and say, 'The effect of satellite television ...' '

Shouts of laughter greeted this description.

'All grown-ups aren't bad, surely,' defended Hari. 'Some of them can be quite understanding.'

'Yes, but I hate the sarcastic ones,' said Mini. 'They make me want to slam doors. My mother's always complaining about my temper, but it nearly always comes when she calls me and says, 'If its not too much trouble, please clean up the table after you have finished dinner,' or 'Are the comforts of this house getting too painful for you?' When I hear such comments, I get really mad!'

Deep looked around. He had not realized so many of his friends had problems relating to grown-ups. All of them seemed to have some problem or the other in getting through to adults. His problem wasn't the only one of its kind in the world. Why should he feel so sad and alone?

The two days they spent on their trip passed by in a happy blur, till Deep was standing once more at the station, one of the last children to be picked up. His father apologised profusely to a tired Mrs. Nair, and Deep thanked her

awkwardly. He followed his father to the parking lot, where he got into the passenger seat of their car.

As he turned to put his bag in the back seat, it occurred to Deep that Mrs. Roy had been sitting in just the seat he was in, that afternoon when he had seen his father and her laughing in such a carefree way.

His heart began to thud—big loud thumps of apprehension and nervousness. But he had to do it now, or he would never know ...

As his father eased into the city traffic, Deep cleared his throat and said, 'Papa, Mrs. Roy is a nice lady, isn't she?'

His father shot him a look of total surprise, but said immediately, without any guilt or hesitation, 'Yes, she is, Deep, very nice. Her daughter is not in your class, though, is she? I thought she was a year younger than you.'

'Yes, she is,' said Deep. His thumping heart had settled down. But he still felt sick and nervous.

'Does she do any work for your office or anything?' asked Deep.

'Who, Mrs. Roy? No she doesn't. Why? In fact, since we moved out of our old colony, I've hardly seen her,' said his father, still showing a hint of astonishment at Deep's queries.

'But Papa, I saw you and her in this car!' Deep blurted out. Miserably, he went on, 'I had gone to Amir's house ... but you both didn't see me ... you were laughing.'

His father braked at a traffic light and turned to look

seriously and earnestly at Deep. 'So that is it? You are worried that she and I are more than friends?'

He turned back to drive, a sad expression on his face, a strange smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. 'Don't worry, Deep. Even though we fight so much, I'm loyal to your mother—and to you. As for Mrs. Roy, yes, we must have been laughing, but that is the last time I saw her.'

'It's okay, Papa,' said Deep gruffly. He felt a huge sense of relief as he stared out of the window at the city sights speeding by.

When they reached home, his father reached in to pull Deep's bag out of the back seat. As Deep hovered nearby, he impulsively pulled him close too.

'Son, I'm sorry we have given you such a rough ride at home,' he said. 'Why don't you talk to us a bit more? Then maybe we would both shut up and listen!'

Deep looked at his father and nodded. Then he opened his mouth and said, 'Yes, I will' for additional emphasis.

So do you think Deep stopped talking to the cat?

DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

/
Hello, is anyone listening?

There was a time in my life when I was afraid to open my mouth and speak. It seemed as if anything I said was either irritating someone, or having a completely different effect than I had intended. At such times, I would feel frustrated, stomp out of a room in anger, banging a door or two on the way. Does such a scenario seem at all familiar to you?

All that was years ago. These days I am part of the silent audience that is left in the room *after* my children have flounced away!

There is a peculiar problem in communicating with adults when one is a teenager. At such times the problem really seems to be: are adults truly listening? However, as with most such questions, there is another unasked question that lies behind this one: if adults are not listening, then are we speaking to them in the right way? The answer is, a little bit of both. Yes, adults often don't seem to be really listening. And yes, one of the reasons adults don't listen is because we don't know how to get through to them.

Er ... um ... like, you know ...

When one has grown up a bit, one learns to communicate a little better. But that doesn't mean we let things be as they are in those crucial years when one needs to get through to adults about so many important things! Clear and honest communication with adults is vital at every level. Only with such communication can our needs be met with any comfort.

Like it or not, we need adults.

Virtually everything we need to stay happy and comfortable is brought to us by adults. Whether it is the milkman, or the person behind the counter at the movie multiplex, we need to deal with adults at some level or the other throughout the day. What if, along the way, we communicate in a manner that produces hostility or anger? It will mean having to be very nimble on our feet, ready to take off at a moment's notice! Maintaining pleasant and stress-free communication is a much better strategy.

Adults teach us things and guide us in difficult times.

How could we tackle various life situations if it were not for

the experience and wisdom of adults around us? Whether they're parents, teachers, neighbours or relatives, we depend on these adults for information and advice in crucial times. Communicating clearly with adults means that they are also able to give us the best guidance and help.

Adults know what to do when things go wrong.

In school and college, we are still in the care of our parents. While this may seem like an imposition at times, making us yearn to be in control of our own destiny, it is a big relief when things go wrong, to find that we have people who can set it right for us. Whether it is an accident with your cycle on your way to school, or a neighbour's broken window, or your Principal's threat to expel you, it is a responsible adult who knows how to handle the situation. In fact, by seeing our parents negotiate some of these situations, we learn a lot about how to handle trouble now, and in later years.

Crossed wires and dead connections

However, things are hardly ideal when it comes to teenager-adult communication. The times of undisturbed peace are few and far between, compared to the times of trouble in the

relationship. Why is it so difficult for children and grown-ups to communicate with each other?

Rudeness, or perceived disrespect.

When talking to an adult, it is important to pitch the conversation correctly. This is not only because you want to avoid giving an impression of being rude or disrespectful, it is also because you want to be treated with equal respect.

False assumptions on the part of adults.

There are many things adults tend to assume about children, about adolescents, and about the changing world around them. Sometimes these assumptions are right. Often they are quite wrong. When this happens, don't explode in anger, but try and clarify what you are communicating without giving the impression that you are trying to talk to an idiot child. Adults don't like to be talked down to, any more than you do!

Issues relating to performance.

Children and their parents most often get into rows about performance, or the lack of it. 'What led to this dismal showing in the first term exams?' is a question an adult is perfectly within his or her rights to ask. Maintaining good communication with adults becomes easier when your performance is satisfying to people other than just yourself. Come on, raise your standards, perform!

Issues around rules, power and authority.

Whatever environment you share with adults when you are growing up, whether it is home or school, hostel or public place, there are definite rules in operation that have to be respected to maintain peace and serenity. Children often have a need to defy these rules and this can cause some friction from time to time. Why do kids want to break the rules? The answers may be many. Perhaps they feel that the rules are different as they apply to them and as they apply to adults, and find this unfair. Or they need to explore the limit of their own daring. Whatever the reason is, it is not a good idea to disregard rules, the role of authority, and the power such authority possesses, more than once or twice. Frequently getting into trouble for breaking the rules gets you the tag of a 'troublemaker' and consequently, less respect in conversations and discussions with adults.

Loud and clear

Communicating with adults can become much better if you take a few positive steps.

Be respectful. Avoid rudeness, sarcasm, or what can be perceived as arrogance. This doesn't mean you have to crawl, but self-respect also involves full respect for others.

Have enough time. Don't start discussing something very

important just when you are on the point of leaving for someplace, or when the person you are talking to is clearly in the act of leaving. Make sure you have space and time to think and talk clearly.

Have a clear idea of what you want to convey. Don't confuse yourself and your audience with a lot of going back and forth, recounting past incidents and grievances, getting steadily more garbled in the process. Concentrate on the point you are trying to get across. Keep things crisp and focused. Be direct, honest and polite.

Give full attention. Nothing is ever achieved in communicating with another human being if they feel you are only talking to them half-heartedly, or while listening to music, watching TV, or looking somewhere else. Listen completely, and make eye contact. Talk earnestly, so that the other person also feels compelled to give you his or her full attention.

Show affection, wherever appropriate. Smile, don't be hostile. Don't be afraid to express your affection especially to family members. How will you receive any love if you withhold your own? Loving communication is the best kind.

Meaningful conversations with adults can bring you dividends in many unexpected ways.

All the best!

SELF-IMAGE AND SELF-ESTEEM

No. _____

Date: _____

LESSONS IN LOOKING ...

... AT YOURSELF

The Brat Confessions

Annie shared a bedroom with her younger sister, Lizzy, who was eight years old, and very irritating. She was morbidly curious about everything Annie did or had. Annie had to campaign long and hard with her parents to get an exclusive cupboard in the room, in which Lizzy was not to be allowed to have a single little drawer. If this had not been done, Lizzy would still have been rifling through Annie's things with the excuse, 'I was looking for a hair band.'

It wouldn't have mattered if she just looked. But Lizzy looked, drew conclusions, and then related what she had seen, and what she had understood from what she had seen, in public. So at the most awkward moments, her parents, friends, and relatives got a complete account of what Lizzy thought was happening in Annie's life. For example, when she found that Annie had a two year old photograph of Sammy Joseph, as he stood on the winner's stand receiving a prize on Sports Day, she kept quiet about it for a few days. Then

one day, at the dinner table, at a suitable pause in the conversation, Lizzy said, with great satisfaction, 'Chechi (elder sister) likes Sammy Joseph.'

Everybody turned to look at Annie and she turned shocked, then murderous eyes on her sister. 'Really Annie?' asked her mother. 'I thought you didn't like Sammy any more. I thought you now liked the Head Boy, what's his name?'

'Tony Singh,' automatically supplied Lizzy, unperturbed by Annie's glare. Then she went on with great authority, 'No Mummy. Tony already likes Maya in Chechi's class. Chechi likes Sammy still. She has his picture in her bag.' She munched a little more of her food. 'I like Sammy,' she announced. 'I think he looks better than Tony.'

'Lizzy!' yelled Annie across the table. 'How dare you? Mummy, see she is always snooping among my things! How can you make me share my room with such a creepy, sneaky, brat of a sister?'

'There, there, Annie', said Annie's father with an amused expression. 'Don't mind your sister. What would we do if she wasn't there to tell us all the interesting details of your life, no Lizzy?' and he smiled at his younger daughter, who grinned back.

'Papa!' an infuriated Annie was moved to exclaim. 'Its not a joking matter. Lizzy has absolutely no right to poke and pry among my things!' she was very angry by now. Her father, looking most unconcerned, was offering Lizzy a tidbit

from his plate. 'How can parents be so beastly and insensitive?' she thought, and could suddenly not bear to eat another morsel.

She got up from the table, and flounced into the room that she still, regrettably, shared with her brat of a sister. Banging the door and locking it, she flung herself on the bed and started to cry.

Annie's world seemed very bleak just then. She had just discovered that her jeans—the really good blue-green ones—did not fit her any more. Early in the evening, she had tried to get them on, but the button at the waistline just wouldn't reach its destination, and the zipper wouldn't close, either. 'Oh my God!' Annie had thought. 'These jeans fitted me till two months ago at cousin George's wedding! They were just a little tight then. How could I have grown so fat in such a short time?'

But the jeans were only part of the story. When Annie went and looked in the mirror, she found her cheeks looking puffy and round. She was positively FAT!

Annie cried and felt a little better, but only a little. Was there any hope for her? A fat girl with frizzy hair and braces to straighten her crooked teeth, who was also burdened with a sister who could only be described as a she-devil. A devil with pearly white, even teeth, dimples in both cheeks, and hair that was wavy, rather than frizzy, 'More like my mother's actually,' her father explained to visitors who admired it.

And now, even her good, perfectly unmarked blue-green jeans were going to be put aside for this devil to wear sometime in the future, because 'Chechi's become too fat' Annie could imagine her sister saying. She stomped a fist into a pillow in acute frustration. 'I hope, by the time she grows up enough to wear those jeans, flared bottoms have gone completely out of style!' thought Annie viciously.

Her mother had obviously warned Lizzy not to bother Annie for some time, because after the clinking of dinner things, Annie heard 'Takeshi's Castle' come on on Pogo TV. After some time, a discreet knock told her that her mother stood outside the door. She got up, reluctantly, to open it, and moved away from the door, rubbing her eyes, back towards the bed before her mother could make any move to enter the room.

Mummy entered the room carrying a small pile of washed and folded clothes. She placed these in the common cupboard that both the sisters used, and gently asked, 'Annie, if you want to finish your dinner, your plate is still on the table.'

'No, Mummy,' said Annie. 'That Lizzy makes me lose my appetite. And why does Papa encourage her? I hate it.'

Mummy came close and patted a hand over Annie's frizzy head. 'I'll have a word with him,' she promised. 'But don't mind what she says. Why bother so much? Its only us she's telling these things to.'

'Mummy, you don't know!' hissed Annie. 'She does the

same thing in front of all the building kids, or in Ammama's house when Jacob is there (their handsome, college-going cousin). Its horrible.'

'I'll tell her, too,' said Mummy with a slightly grim set to her mouth. 'She has no business making you look bad in front of anybody. But do remember, she is your sister. Maybe she wouldn't do all this if you just gave her more attention, included her in your activities.'

'I can't, Mummy,' said Annie, with some of the anger returning to her voice, as she buried her face once more in the pillow. 'Just don't ask me to.'

'All right, Annie,' said Mummy with resignation. She went out of the room.

Annie took her cell phone out of the hiding place behind the bathroom door where she had put it to keep Lizzy from finding it. She began typing a message, 'Sis is in heaven and I'm in hell' she told her friend Rini. 'She told my parents at dinner that I still like Sammy.'

'What?!' the reply beeped back in a minute from Rini. 'How can she? That was at least 2 yrs back.'

'Idiot' typed back Annie. 'It was 2 yrs, but I find his new hairstyle just too cute.'

'So what plans do u have?' asked Rini.

'None,' typed Annie. 'He wouldn't look at me anyway. I just found I can't fit into another pair of jeans.'

She and Rini continued exchanging notes for a while,

till Annie heard Lizzy announce loudly from the hall, 'Mummy, I'm going to sleep!'

Annie typed one last 'Gtg' (got to go) to Rini and slipped the cell phone into her pocket before Lizzy came to the door of their room. She was obviously feeling a little nervous about her reception, because she made no attempt to talk to Annie, just changed quietly into her nightdress, and went to sleep.

Just before she slipped herself under the bedsheet, she said generously to Annie, 'You can have the light on for as long as you like Chechi. I'll just cover my eyes and sleep.'

Annie refused to even answer that last remark. 'Trust the brat to act all holy now,' she thought to herself.

The next few days saw an uneasy truce prevail at home between Annie and her sister. Annie tried to ignore her sister as much as she could, and Lizzy seemed content to be there, not even trying to use her superior clout with Papa to pull any rank with her elder sister. Only once, when Annie caught her sister looking over her shoulder as she chatted online with her friends did the truce threaten to explode into war. Annie felt the rush of Lizzy's breath on her right side, and Lizzy asked in surprise, 'Are you chatting to Sammy? Is that his sign-in name, 'Wolf in wolf's clothing'?' Then Lizzy had to duck as Annie aimed a heavy pencil holder at her from the desk.

But the object never left her hand. Papa's voice was heard

in the hall, and peace reigned again.

‘What is my place in this house?’ demanded Annie of her mother that evening.

‘Why dearest, why do you ask?’ asked her mother surprised.

‘Because I’m always the one having my faults pointed out to me, while Lizzy seems to get away with everything. And Papa is always talking about how she resembles his side of the family, because she looks so ‘cute’.’ Here Annie made a pout of distaste. ‘And I don’t seem to count for anything. Even you keep making things to eat that Lizzy likes,’ said Annie accusingly.

‘Well dear, nobody stopped you from taking more interest in the kitchen yourself. Remember the brownies you made last summer? You can be a great cook if you want,’ said her mother.

‘I don’t want to cook!’ said Annie in frustration. ‘I want to be treated like a human being!’

‘Okay,’ said her mother, determined to stay peaceful.

Later that night, she was struggling to complete an assignment in Biology, that involved a lot of drawing. As she bent over her work, Annie saw her sister’s shadow fall over the page, and felt instantly alert and angry.

‘What do you want?’ she asked her sister combatively.

‘You draw very nicely, Chechi,’ said Lizzy, showing both her dimples.

Annie grimaced, not wanting to accept any compliment from this particular direction. Lizzy continued, ‘My class teacher was telling me that if I worked really hard in Science, I may become as good as you were. She said you were very good in Maths and English too.’

‘Really, Mrs. D’Souza said that?’ Annie felt a pleased ripple of surprise.

‘Yes, she did,’ said Lizzy. ‘The Primary teachers are always praising you. They’re always asking me to be as good, and I don’t do so well in studies,’ she wrinkled her nose. ‘Its hard to be your sister in school,’ she said.

Annie looked up at her, quite stunned. Her mind was forming an sms message to Rini, ‘Sis says its hard to be my sis! Look who’s talking!’

Lizzy came and stood even closer. ‘Will you help me complete my project charts? Please draw some of the complicated parts,’ she pleaded.

‘How can I?’ asked Annie in frustration. ‘I have my own assignment to complete. Don’t you see, its so complicated! It’ll take me another hour at least.’

‘Please, I’ll sit next to you and start the drawing,’ said Lizzy. ‘You can just draw the difficult parts later. It won’t take you five minutes,’ she added, looking as sweet as she possibly could. ‘Maybe five seconds!’

Annie looked up from her work and gave her a warning look. Lizzy made place for herself on the table, drew a chair

close to it, and began sketching her chart.

Annie looked at her sister. She felt a strange mixture of feelings. This was the same nuisance of a sister who gave her such a hard time on most days. And yet, not five minutes ago, she had made her feel better about herself than Annie had felt in days.

‘Is it really hard for you to be my sister?’ she asked Lizzy after a while.

‘Yes, it really is, Chechi,’ said Lizzy, immediately keeping her pen aside to look at Annie. ‘Mrs. D’Souza always wonders why I don’t take help from you in my homework. She says I wouldn’t make so many mistakes if I did.’

‘I suppose ... I could help you if you wanted ...’ said Annie. This was a surprise. Her bratty sister felt as insecure about herself as Annie did. Perhaps more, if she was to be believed, for Lizzy was prattling on, ‘Why, even for this Project Day work, the teachers kept on remembering your class, and all the good work you had done, specially you. I felt very jealous at first, then I was proud.’

‘Proud?’ asked Annie. ‘Proud of me?’ her voice cracked slightly in embarrassment.

‘Yes, I like telling people you’re my sister,’ said Lizzy. ‘Thank goodness I don’t have someone else as my sister. I couldn’t bear it if I had a sister like ... like Nina Pinto.’

That did it. Lizzy had just named Annie’s pet hate—the pushy, pony-tailed assistant Head Girl who had confiscated

Annie’s cell-phone for no reason a few months ago. Annie looked at her sister. Somehow, she didn’t look particularly bratty just then!

The next morning, Annie’s mother woke early and passed the work table in the study where the sisters had been sitting the previous night. There was Annie’s Class XI Biology journal, with all her stationery neatly stacked on top. And there was the most exquisitely drawn Class V Project chart on Musical Instruments of India.

‘Goodness!’ thought Annie’s mother. ‘I didn’t know Lizzy could draw like that!’

Now how did such a perfect chart get drawn overnight?

'MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL...'

Happy to be me

Have you ever wondered who you are and what your place is in the scheme of things? There are some times and places that just naturally make you think such thoughts. When you look at the vast expanse of ocean from a stormy beach, or when you travel by a bus at night, and get a whiff of the forest, with its dark green, mysterious trees ...

A cold hillside, with a clear night sky above, sparkling with a million stars, once made me think 'Who am I? Why am I here?' And in a similar situation many years later, I had a glimmer of the answers too. 'Whoever I am, I am glad to be here, looking up at these stars, and they at me! I am happy, I am safe, I am special' I told myself.

Trying to understand who we are, and enjoying our uniqueness and special qualities is not easy. It takes most of us years of experience to get there. Such a task appears especially difficult in the troubled 'growing up' years, when so many things are changing inside and outside of us, that it is difficult to keep up. An adolescent's body feels quite different from the happy, playful, untroubled body one is

used to as a child. Gawkinsness, braces on one's teeth or new spectacles, changes in one's body that are suddenly embarrassing, all these are part of the 'growing up' process that can be quite stressful to those who are going through it.

In addition to all these changes, there are other difficult things for teenagers to negotiate. Relating to others is definitely a troubled area, more so because it affects one's image of oneself and the world.

I wish I was an English muffin

Do you often find yourself wishing you were fairer, taller, thinner, cleverer, funnier ... anything but what you are? Such feelings of inadequacy, of wanting to be something you are not, are common at this age. What are the things that really complicate the development of a positive self-image when one is growing up?

'Why are you like this?'

All the negative feedback that has to be faced from others, particularly from family.

Our parents and family members want to see us improve in all ways. This is only natural since they want the best in life for

us! But while we get there, listening to their 'constructive' criticism, or plain nagging, can take a heavy toll on our self-confidence. As parents struggle with their teenaged children, they tend to correct their offspring with remarks like 'You're selfish, why don't you ...' or 'You're lazy, why don't you ...'

With time, all this negative baggage accumulates on the personality of the teenager who is the target of all these suggestions. 'I'm selfish, lazy, and downright bad' is the feeling he or she is getting from the perceptions of others. 'Am I really like this?' the child may well question. If the child has a robust sense of self, the answer will be loud and clear: 'Of course not!' But sometimes, when the child is sad, depressed or lonely this voice gets weakened. Then all the child hears is the outside voices that say, 'Selfish! Lazy! Rude! Bad!'

It is only much later in life, when the voices have all receded into the past, that one can consistently carry more positive images about oneself, and feel kindly towards the family.

Small waists, big muscles

All the external standards that define what is beautiful, successful, good.

The glittering world outside is full of beautiful people, or at least, people who are considered successful, beautiful, or

somehow worth imitating. Such 'role models' seem to be projecting standards for teenagers to follow. Wearing the right clothes, having the right body shape, possessing the latest things, being bold, and entertaining and sassy—all these become suddenly much more important to adolescents. This can sometimes have very dangerous side effects. Many teenage girls suffer from the life-threatening eating disorder called anorexia nervosa. Anorexics look at themselves in the mirror and always think 'I'm too fat.' This, even when they may be thinner than the proverbial pencil! The obsession with being slim prevents them from perceiving reality.

Similarly, boys have been known to have had severe headaches, which have been finally attributed to too many vitamins. In a society where there is constant discussion about building muscles with proper vitamin intake, adolescents are most likely to succumb to the pressure to be appropriately muscled.

External determinants of self-image can have a devastating effect on our self-esteem, or respect for ourselves, if we are not strong enough to stand up to them.

'You're so weird'

The lack of positive and encouraging role models in our own immediate environment.

Our image of who we are has a lot to do with the kind of

people we see around us. If we have people in our vicinity who set good examples, who live interesting and unusual lives, and who encourage and nurture the bright spark we possess, then we can develop a positive self-image without difficulty. If we have very few individuals around us whom we want to be like, and if people who surround us think we are weird, or wayward, or worthy of correction at all times, then we have to struggle harder to create a good image of ourselves. Having helpful and successful people among our family, friends, relatives, neighbours and teachers helps in the development of our own personality, even though this may sound far-fetched at times.

'Aaargh! Is that me?'

When our self-image is dented, and our self-esteem is low, the mirror can be a harsh instrument to have.

Pimples and puppy fat, skinny limbs and spiky hair, gawky neck and teeth covered by steel braces—a teenager often does not present the most beautiful sight. This can be a painful experience, especially when you compare yourself with your old photographs in which you look like the cutest baby in the world!

Through the looking-glass

Next time you look into the mirror, look past the physical reflection, and see beyond it. Behind the puppy fat and the pimples is still the happy baby you once were. Beyond the gawkiness is the confident adult, the responsible and mature person you are going to become. Don't allow your ideas of yourself to be limited by today's mirror reflection. Life is much larger and lovelier than just today's image, and you owe it to yourself to remember this!

Thoughts on a cold hillside

As I mentioned earlier, I once did get a glimmer of the answers to that eternal question: who am I? But that was many years later—after all the voices that were telling me I was lazy, selfish and bad had faded away, after I had tried many things, failed at a few of them, and succeeded at others, after I had stopped trying to fit into any of the advertised norms of being beautiful, successful and good.

Long after all this, I looked up at the stars again, and a voice inside said 'Yes! This is who you're meant to be. This is

the meaning of being alive—just using each moment to be happy, and to become a kinder, braver, better person!

I'm very grateful to those stars, for clearing up the confusion in my head that was once a natural state of mind for me, when I was fourteen.

I hope I've been able to help clear away some of *your* confusion.

Be happy!